MYRTLE THOMPSON HIGHTOWER

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II
Co-Sponsored by:
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library and
The San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society

Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

MYRTLE THOMPSON HIGHTOWER

December 12, 1978

Place: 2063 Hayes Street, San Francisco

Interviewer: Jessie J. Warr
Transcriber: Mary Wells

[First interview available on tape only as there are loud machinery noises throughout which have prevented transcription.]

JW: I'd like to start with looking back briefly at your career with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Did you have any persistent feelings that you were being under-utilized working there when you had a college degree?

MH: Yes. When I...you must remember now. In 1938, no, this was in '41, it was after the War. There were government jobs, but there were not too many other jobs still for Blacks. And I had worked for the federal government, but I went to work for the State because I had a little daughter to take care of, and I figured that would be more permanent. You know, something I could rely on much more than the jobs that they had open during that time for Federal Government. Of course, since that time, you know, they're in all departments, but at that time, they were just in the temporary offices that they had set up in San Francisco.

JW: What about later? Had you considered switching careers?

MH: Well, then later, you know, I did mostly specialized work for the Department of Motor Vehicles. In other words, I worked for a time in what they called the Automobile Dealer Section, and there you would have...say a man might have a flatbed and he would decide to make a van or something out of it. Then you would have to take all of the equipment and analyze it and find out what it costs, the year it was manufactured and then go back to a chart and then bring it up to standard and then put your fees on it and then have them get a weight certificate. So, it was a little involved, and I really enjoyed that. And then later, of course, I had charge of the AAA's Automobile Club...all of this work, and the National Automobile Club and

MH: personalized license plates, and then if anyone made an error in the office, it came to my desk and then I would contact the people, you know, and tell them what happened, and if I needed more money, I would ask for more money. Or if they needed a Bill of Sale, or if the title was incorrect, or whatever it was, I would have to get, you know, have to write them or call them on the phone, and get it from them.

JW: Did you ever have any really unusual personalized plates come in?

MH: Satan. And he looked like Satan. Oh, he was...oh, he scared me to death! He has this church. You this...what do they call this church?

JW: [Chuckle] They have a Church of Satan?

MH: Yes. Well, this man is over it, and he's the one that had "Satan" on his license plates. He was in black, and his hair came down here. And one day someone from Channel Four came in and he wanted to find out about personalized plates, so the manager told him he would have to see me. So Cal was talking to him, you know, about the plates, and sometimes the plates identify with the person. And so he says, "You know, that's interesting." So he said, "Could I get you on television? Could we bring the television cameras here?" I said, "You will have to get permission." So the manager said yes. So then they interviewed me right there on television. It was on the news about four or five nights, I think. And then some of them are funny, you know...Oh, I'll never forget this man. He was weird! He was really a weird person! And he had "Satan I" and "Satan II" on his license plates. He got them.

JW: Do you remember any of the funny ones?

MH: Let's see. It seems like it's been so long since I worked down there.

JW: Well, maybe we can put those in later. Did you ever consider... had you wanted to teach music when you came out?

MH: I did at first. I did want to teach music. In fact, I played for Mr. Anderson on radio in the morning for a while, and then I had my own group at Bethel; a group of young women about fifteen. They used to go to different churches and different places.

JW: What was the group's name?

MH: Well, we just went under Bethel A.M.E. Church.

JW: But you never considered, or did you consider switching out of DMV?

MH: I did. In fact, at that time they still hadn't put people into grammar schools and high schools and things like that. So what some of the gals were doing, like Dianza Reynolds and her sister, Dorothy, and Granville Jackson's wife and all of them, they went to the nursery schools first. So I did too, but then I had broken hours. One week I would open up, and the next week I'd have to close. And that didn't work out when I had a babysitter. It didn't work out too well. So I figured, well, I'll just... I'll go back to Motor Vehicles. So I did.

JW: So you were away from Motor Vehicles how long?

MH: I guess about four or five months.

JW: And this was in the early Fifties?

MH: Yes.

JW: Do you think that if you had been White you would have gone farther up on the ladder?

MH: Yes. I was at a banquet about two months ago over on Treasure Island, and there were about five hundred people there, and after the ceremony, he says, "Where's my Hightower?". And so I was there, and he asked me if I would say a few words, which I did. And later one of the managers said, "You know, Myrt, you were twenty years too soon." He said, "Had you been a little later, you would have been right up there at the top, because you really knew it. But, unfortunately, that's the way it was." I said, "Yes, that's the way it was." [Chuckle]

JW: There's a Black woman who [unintelligible.]

MH: Yes, I met her.

JW: What was her name?

MH: Don't ask me...oh. But now they even have a manager over in Marin...a Black woman. See, that was unheard of, you know. They didn't even want you in the office so how could you go anywhere, you know. So I just stayed for devilment at first, because they didn't want any Blacks. The senior examiner was Jewish. He said, "You know you won't be very happy here." And he said, "In fact, I have to interview other people."

MH: I said, "Okay." Because I was number one on the list, and I knew that if he didn't take me, he couldn't take anyone else. So, you know, I took it then just for meanness. At first. Then I found out what they were doing, and so I said, "Well, maybe I'd better stay here because at least you can help." And about six months before I left, there were two young Black men who came in. Oh, I was at my desk. See, I don't go to the counter. And so they looked at me, and they beckoned and so I went to the counter. And they looked...oh, they had the most horrible look on their faces, you know, like they had lost their best friend. So I said maybe I'd better go. So I said, "Just a minute, I'll be there." So I went over and sure enough, this youngster had his pink slip. He and this other young man had been sitting in a car on Third, you know, out there by [unintelligible]; in that area. And the cops came by in a car, and he showed them the pink slip, which he didn't have to do. As long as you have a registration, you do not carry a pink slip. Okay, they asked for the pink slip, and they showed it to them. They made them get out of the car and towed it away. And I said, "Were you doing anything?" They said, "No." I said, "You didn't have any dope or anything?" "No." I said, "Okay, I believe you." I said, "Sit over there for a few minutes, and I'm going to make a call." So I sat them down and one of the fellows that I worked very closely with was an investigator for Motor Vehicles. So I called Mike. And I said, "Mike, I have a problem down here. Are you busy?" He said, "I'll be down in a minute." So sure enough, he came down, and I explained to him about the young men. He took one look at them and he said, "I believe them." He said, "I believe what you tell me." He said, "You know, this has got to stop in San Francisco. They wouldn't have done that had they not been Black." He made a call down ...I don't know where Mike called, but when he got through cussing them out, they told the boys to come and get the car. They didn't have to pay the towing charges. They didn't have to pay anything. So they thanked me, and they went on and picked up the car. And the next morning, one of them came in and he had two dozen red roses. Then when Dr. Collin's son, Buddy...the fifteen and a half law had just gone through...and if you were in an area where you could not get to school, you know, you could get one of these licenses from school to home. So over in Marin or wherever it was, they wouldn't give it to him. So, anyhow, they came over. Dan called me and they came over here. So I put in a call to Sacramento, and they told me to make out all of the forms and everything. And they said, "Are they friends of yours?" And I said, "Yes." And so Buddy got his license. So, I mean, there were a lot of, you know, little

MH: things where there was prejudice, that I was able to really break down. And I wouldn't back down. If I was right, I wouldn't back down on anything. It didn't make any difference what it was. You know, I wouldn't back down. Although sometimes they didn't like it, but I still wouldn't.

JW: I wanted to ask you briefly about your first marriage.

MH: Ha! Ha!

JW: This was the person you met at Prairie View?

MH: Yes. We were both music majors. We went through school together. Let's see, Thurm graduated two years before...he was a junior when I was a freshman.

JW: His first name was what?

MH: Thurman Rinhines.

JW: R-i-n-h-i-n-e-s?

MH: Yes. H-i-n-e-s.

JW: What was his family background? Was he from Texas?

MH: Yes. He was from Houston.

JW: And he eventually went on to teach music or what?

MH: Oh, he taught band and orchestra in San Antonio.

JW: That's where you moved when you got married?

MH: Yes, that's where I lived when I got married.

JW: Did you get married right out of college?

MH: No, because my father asked me to come home, and I did. Come home and stay a year, so I did.

JW: So did he ever come and visit you here?

MH: Yes. Yes, he came out.

JW: So at the time you were in love.

MH: Yes. Yes. [Chuckle] Yes, it would have worked. I mean, we never had any problems or anything, but we had a mother to contend with, you know.

JW: You had what?

MH: His mother to contend with.

JW: Oh, what was her problem?

MH: Well, her problem was...I guess she had been alone, you know, and she was going to live in Los Angeles and get married, and the next thing we got from her, she was going to come to San Antonio and live. She wasn't going to get married. So it just ...you know, people would invite us out; we had our friends from Prairie View. There were so many there. And they would say, "No, we invited you, but don't bring your mother-in-law." Well, you know, it was always putting us on the spot. And sometimes we'd just throw our clothes over the fence and duck out and one would go out the front and one would go out the back and get in the car, and she wouldn't see us until the next day. Then she wouldn't talk to us. But it just...it couldn't work. You know...and you're not going to tell someone that their mother is doing little things. She could always think of things to do, you know, that maybe no one would notice them but you. And I just...well, it just wasn't...it wasn't going to work, you know. Not with the three of us in the house together. Of course, I'm not going to tell anyone not to have his mother there if he wants his mother there, you know.

JW: So you just decided on an amiable divorce?

MH: Yes. No, I didn't decide. I came home.

JW: To have the baby?

MH: No, I came home because I found out you couldn't go to a hospital in Texas unless something went wrong at the last minute.

JW: You mean if you were Black?

MH: Yes, if you were Black. And a friend of mine had just died from child birth. And I'm telling you, it was annoying; like a voice wouldn't leave me alone, you know, just said, "You'd better get to San Francisco." And she thought it was funny, and of course he went along with it. They thought I was just being spoiled. But I wasn't. Because when I came here, I had

MH: convulsions. I was very sick, and I had a Caesarian operation. And had I not been here and at Stanford Hospital, I would have died. But, anyhow, she was always there, coming in between. So I figured, well, in three years he should have grown up enough...he'll grow up enough to either see all of this or he will not, you know. And if he doesn't, you know, that's the end of that. So, of course, I waited three years. He didn't come out here. But when he did come out, I had remarried. So then that was the end of that.

JW: Was there a stigma attached to divorce at that time?

MH: No. No, I don't think so. No. No, I was hurt, you know, more than anything else by the whole thing. Because, you know, after you've planned everything. You have everything going. We had everything...things going for you, and it just doesn't work out. I think there's a hurt there more than...

JW: Did he ever remarry?

MH: No.

JW: What about your present husband? How did you meet him?

MH: I met him through some friends. A friend of mine was here, and she had graduated with me from Prairie View. She and her husband and Cogg, you know, who the school was named after?

JW: Yes.

MH: Well, they asked me to go and play bridge with them, and they wanted me to meet someone. They said I stayed home too much. So they wanted me to meet High. [Chuckle] So then we, you know, started going out together, and we belonged to the same church.

JW: He also was a Texan?

MH: He also is a Texan, right. He's from Dallas. His father is a minister.

JW: Was his family well off?

MH: I think they...'cause they own quite a bit of property down there, even now.

JW: Did he have a college degree?

MH: He didn't finish Prairie View, no.

JW: Oh, did you know him while you were there?

MH: No, I didn't. Because I think he was there summers; odd times when I wasn't there.

JW: What kind of work does he do for a living?

MH: Well, he was a real estate broker, and then he was a supervisor at the Post Office.

JW: For most of his working life?

MH: Yes.

JW: Here in San Francisco?

MH: Here in San Francisco. Before he came here, I don't know. He did something else before he came to San Francisco. I think he was in the insurance business.

JW: This was in Texas?

MH: Yes.

JW: When did he come here to San Francisco?

MH: He was here when I came back, I think.

JW: Around the beginning of the Second World War?

MH: Yes, I guess so. Because the Second World War, the beginning of it, I wasn't here.

JW: You have one daughter?

MH: Yes.

JW: What's her name?

MH: Sophia Ann Malcolm.

JW: Again?

MH: S-o-p-h-i-e A-n-n Malcolm. M-a-l-c-o-l-m.

JW: That's her married name?

MH: Yes.

JW: And when was she born?

MH: She was born May 19, 1942.

JW: At which hospital did you say?

MH: She was born here at Stanford in San Francisco.

JW: Oh, I was thinking of Stanford University Hospital.

MH: It used to be here.

JW: Oh, I see.

MH: Yes, and they moved it. It's been down there about what...ten years or something like that. But it was here in San Francisco.

JW: Did you raise her as you had been raised, or did you have some different ideas about childhood?

MH: I think I raised her just about the way I was raised.

JW: Do you think you were very strict with her? Or does she think you were very strict? [Chuckle]

MH: She thought I was very strict with her. She thought I was strict. [Chuckle] But, evidently she thinks differently because I know how she...

JW: Did you ever want other children?

MH: Yes, I did.

JW: Did you consider adoption?

MH: At one time I did but, you know, I was working and one was enought. [Chuckle]

JW: What does she do for a living?

MH: Well, right now she is going to San Jose State.

JW: That's right. She's not much younger than I am. [Chuckle]

MH: Although she could have really been through and even had her Ph.D., she married when she was what...19, and she was in college then. So, you know, she didn't finish. Now she wants to finish and get her Masters and she has another term to go.

JW: Is her husband a San Francisco native?

MH: He's Jamaican.

JW: Oh. Do you belong to [unintelligible?]

MH: No, I did years ago, but then I went away to school. I got out of it, and I didn't get back into it.

JW: What did that organization do in those days?

MH: Let me see, what did they do? Well, they used to have fashion shows...it's been so long ago since I was associated with the [unintelligible.]

JW: Did they [unintelligible?]

MH: Oh, they used to have a forum, a Sunday afternoon forum that was very nice, and they would have a speaker every fourth Sunday of the month. That's right. That was very nice. And they always had, you know, very nice speakers and a very nice program.

JW: Did you have to be a San Franciscan by birth to belong to this?

MH: No, no, you didn't.

JW: How did one get in?

MH: Well, this was a club of Booker T. Washington Community Center, and I know how I got in. I belonged to a younger group, and then when you were what...eighteen, I think you could go into the [unintelligible.] That's the way I got in. Because when they organized, they wouldn't let any of us in. [Chuckle]

JW: Because you were too young?

MH: Yes. We were younger than what they were.

JW: What other sorority or women's organizations did you belong to?

MH: Well, I belong to the National Council of the Bay Area Service League, and that's all I belong to now. And Bethel A.M.E. Church.

JW: And Eastern Star?

MH: And Eastern Star.

JW: What about Jack and Jill? How did you get involved in that?

MH: Well, when they were going to organize it, they had the grammar school children, and they had the senior high group, but they didn't have a junior high group. So when they were going to organize a junior high group, they asked me and about five other ladies to start it and that's how I got into Jack and Jill.

JW: What's Jack and Jill's goals?

MH: Well, it's supposed to be a family thing where the family...well, it is a family organization. That's number one. Where the family would do things together. But it's also for children like... where you maybe have one or you have children of different ages, and they haven't anyone to go out with, then they would plan affairs and different things for these youngsters all in the same group. And that's primarily what it's purpose was for.

JW: Did your parents have to be middle-class in order to belong to Jack and Jill?

MH: I think most of them were just about.

JW: Back East where I'm from, they are extremely elite. In the old days you had to be light-skinned...

MH: Blue Bloods, huh? Yes.

JW: And your father had to be a doctor for you to get in.

MH: Yes, but not here. You know...any...if you...I don't know. I guess if you had just been here or...I really don't know how they picked them because Judge Reynold's wife was the one who took my name in when they were going to start the junior group.

JW: But you got in Jack and Jill by invitation, and not by application?

MH: That's right.

JW: In what years were you involved in Jack and Jill?

MH: Let me see...from the time Sophie was in junior high school...

JW: About the middle Fifties?

MH: Yes, I guess so. Up until senior high school. Until she graduated from senior high school, she was in Jack and Jill.

JW: Did you ever belong to the NAACP?

MH: Yes.

JW: Do you remember any of the activities that they were involved in?

MH: In fact, you know, they had a National Junior Association, and I was secretary for that, recording secretary.

JW: What kinds of things was the NAACP doing in San Francisco?

MH: Well, there were just...you know, there were so few of us here that we used to have meetings with the San Mateo group, and they would have parties down there and they would have meetings down there, and we would go down there.

JW: In Burlingame, or San Mateo?

MH: No, in San Mateo. Yes, right in San Mateo.

JW: But did they do anything political?

MH: No. No, they didn't. You know, we were really not politically-minded in those days. The kids were not.

JW: Why do you think that is, when the Nineteenth Century San Franciscans were very political?

MH: I know, I know. I don't know.

JW: Was your father involved in political activities?

MH: No.

JW: How long have you been retired now?

MH: '73.

JW: Five years.

MH: Yes.

JW: How did it change your life?

MH: Well, so many things happened to me since I retired, you know. I have been very sick twice. I broke two ankles. My mother became ill and, I don't know, it just seems like everything... I said if I had known this was going to happen, I would have stayed at work. [Chuckle] But I'm busy, you know. Because twice a week I take my daughter's little girl to school, and I pick her up in the afternoon. And now on the 13th, the Bay Area Service League is going to help out with handicapped children at their Christmas party. We have already given a hundred dollars to help with it. So from eleven to two I'm going to be there. On the 17th, we are going to entertain older senior citizens... people in their eighties. We're having a dinner for them so I have to fix food and pick up three ladies and take them. And it's just always something...like tomorrow I'm going to see her. [?]

JW: Have you traveled since you've retired?

MH: No, I haven't been any place but to New York and to Toledo, Ohio to see a friend of my mother's who is ninety-five, and she called me up one day and she said, "I'd love to see you and I haven't seen you since you were a little girl." I said, "You would, huh?" And she said, "Yes, I would." I said, "Okay. Well, you let me call you back." So I talked to my husband and he said, "If she wants to see you, go see her." So my daughter says, "If you'll wait a week, I'll be out of school and we'll go and take the babies." So we went and stayed two weeks with her. Of course, I have some friends who teach in New York, and all of her old cronies in their eighties and nineties, they would come over and keep us company during the day, and then the gals that I knew who were teaching, you know, at night we would do different things. So we stayed with her two weeks.

JW: Is there anything that you would like to do that you haven't done?

MH: Any place I'd like to go?

JW: Yes.

MH: I would like to go to Italy. That's one of the places. I'd like to go to Rome. I want to go to the Opera House there. I really do. That's one of the...and I used to speak Italian, and I think it will come back to me.

JW: Oh, I think it would. I don't speak it, and yet, I was able to get around when I was over there.

MH: Yes.

JW: How did you get into gardening?

MH: Gardening? I have a backyard, that's why. [Chuckle]

JW: You weren't interested in it before you moved here?

MH: Oh, I did a little bit in San Antonio. We had a little yard, but other than that on Lombard Street we didn't because the backyard was all paved.

JW: Do you ever enter any of your plants in contests?

MH: No. I don't think they are good enough.

JW: What do you plan or hope to do in the future?

MH: I don't know. I'm thinking. You know, I have a few hours on my Masters, and I may just go get it one of these days; go back to school.

JW: In music?

MH: Yes. Public school music and education. I have a double major. So it would be education, I think.

JW: You don't have any five, ten or twenty year plan?

MH: I don't make plans like that, because they don't work out the way you want them to, you know, because for two years I couldn't even get around on account of my...you know, I couldn't even walk. Then this year, I had meningitis in March and April. So, I don't make long term plans anymore. I think it's best, you know, not to.

JW: I think we will close the interview now, but I would like to see your father's scrapbook.

MH: Oh, okay.

JW: Thank you.

END TAPE

SYMPHONY DRIVE

She's Made Her Quota

y MILDRED SCHROEDER

s, Samuel D. Hightower, whose
al musical plan calls for at least
ocert a month, has been working
o share the melody.

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Vehicles staff member is the
f some 500 workers in the 1963
rancisco Symphony Foundation
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then some—and she did it before
ficial opening of the drive.

lay is kick-off day through the
Bay area counties when work-
ll offer $15 memberships in the
ation, to raise money to support
mphony Association and Founda-
ndowment Fund, to broaden the
f interest and support for the
tra, to discover and encourage
instrumental talent.

rtle Hightower, a native San
scan, is one of five hostess
s in the unit headed by Mrs.
n Cobb, who serves under Co-
chairman, Mrs. R. C. Caesery.

Examiner Photo.
MRS. SAMUEL D. HIGHTOWER
A Foundation first

Mrs. Hugh E. Reynolds is San Francisco chairman.

Mrs. Hightower, new this year as a Symphony Foundation worker, was recruited last month just as she was packing for vacation. She paused to sign up eight friends whose memberships will entitle them to attend a special rehearsal, a reception for the orchestra, the annual spring concert plus a special Foundation Christmas Festival and to receive the symphony news notes.

The busy matron, whose interests include the National Congress of Negro Women, the Jack and Jill organization, the Bethel AME Church, the Buchanan St. YWCA, also crochets and collects cups. She resides on Hayes St. with her husband, a real estate broker, and her mother. The Hightowers have one daughter, who is married.

Mrs. Hightower plans to attend today's kick-off membership drive meeting, to get ideas for signing up a second quota.